



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Recorded Statement on Veterans' Health Care
Somos El Futuro 2009 Winter Conference
November 8, 2009

Good morning.

I want to welcome you, the members of *Somos El Futuro*, to beautiful Puerto Rico, where so many of you have your roots. I wish I could be there with you. As you know, the House of Representatives is voting on landmark health care legislation this weekend and my duties require that I remain in Washington.

After many months of hard work, I am happy to report that the House bill allocates at least \$12.8 billion dollars to Puerto Rico over the next nine years.

This money will be used to increase the number of residents who qualify for Puerto Rico's Medicaid program and to improve the quality of care they receive.

A portion of the money can also be used to provide federal subsidies to Island residents of modest means to help them purchase coverage through the new health insurance Exchange. The original version of the bill excluded Puerto Rico and the other territories from the Exchange. We fought back—and now we are included.

Finally, the bill makes residents of Puerto Rico eligible for the many consumer protections established in the bill. Insurance companies on the Island, like those in the states, will no longer be able to deny an individual coverage because of a pre-existing condition or drop that individual's coverage when she becomes sick. The bill is not perfect, but it constitutes a giant step forward.

I hope the Senate will follow the House's lead, and I will continue to work with our allies in that chamber—including Senators Schumer, Menendez and Gillibrand—to ensure that the Senate bill treats American citizens in Puerto Rico in a fair and just manner. I have no doubt that *Somos* will be a fierce ally in this effort.

I know that the purpose of this morning's meeting is to discuss issues that affect military veterans from Puerto Rico, particularly in the area of health care. I am so grateful that *Somos* is a champion for men and women from Puerto Rico who have served this country in uniform.

As we approach the Veterans' Day holiday, I want to recognize the veterans that may be in attendance. To you—the soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines from Puerto Rico and the states—thank you so much. Every day we should pause to express gratitude for your service. And every day we should take a moment to honor your comrades who gave their lives in defense of this nation.

As we meet today, our nation remains at war, on multiple fronts, against a determined enemy. Thousands of volunteers from Puerto Rico, the most recent generation in a long line of patriots from the Island, are currently deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq. I know we are all thinking about them now, and praying for their safe return.

I know we are also thinking about those men and women born in Puerto Rico or with strong ties to the Island who have died in those two countries since 2002. In April, we lost two more native sons: Israel Candelaria Mejias and Francisco Aguila.

Since I arrived in Washington in January, one of my most important priorities has been to ensure that soldiers and veterans from Puerto Rico are treated no differently than their fellow soldiers and veterans in the states. Anything less than equal treatment is morally unacceptable.

In September, I met with retired general Eric Shinseki, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and I made this point to him. He expressed his complete agreement. Secretary Shinseki also told me that some of the toughest and most talented soldiers he ever had the privilege to serve with hailed from La Isla del Encanto. Hearing such comments fills me with an incredible—almost indescribable—pride.

I am pleased to report that Congress this year has approved—or is likely to approve soon—a wide variety of measures to assist soldiers and veterans, and that these measures apply fully to soldiers and veterans from Puerto Rico. These measures include a new G.I. Bill, which will

make it much easier for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan to attend college. The bill will help create a new generation of leaders in this country.

My office has also worked successfully to secure the passage of several provisions aimed specifically at helping soldiers and veterans in Puerto Rico. This year, Congress will allocate \$42 million dollars to fund additional improvements to the Veterans Hospital in San Juan. This money is part of a multi-year project to renovate the main hospital building, to construct additional outpatient facilities, and—very importantly—to build a new parking garage. Lack of adequate parking has been among the most consistent concerns cited to me by veterans using the hospital. Many have told me that they must arrive hours before their appointment in order to find parking. That should not be the case—and I believe we are now well on the way to resolving this issue.

I have also proposed the construction of a new veterans' health center in the southwest part of the Island to make health care services more accessible for veterans living in this region and to reduce crowding at the San Juan hospital. In July, I visited a veterans' health center in Columbus, Ohio. I believe this model would be a perfect fit for Puerto Rico. I raised this point with Secretary Shinseki and he expressed strong interest.

In addition, at my request, Congress is allocating nearly \$2.4 million dollars to the Puerto Rico National Guard to construct an urban assault course to help train its soldiers and to purchase four

specialized trucks to help it respond more effectively to hurricanes and other weather emergencies that are so common on the Island.

In March I introduced a bill to ensure that the health care services available to military retirees in Puerto Rico are the same as the services available to military retirees in the states. Military retirees are veterans who served on active duty for at least 20 years. There are an estimated 14,000 retirees under the age of 65 living in Puerto Rico. Under current law, these retirees are eligible only for the military health care program known as TRICARE Standard. By contrast, at least some retirees in 49 of the 50 states are eligible for both TRICARE Standard and an option called TRICARE Prime. Prime offers the lowest out-of-pocket costs, gives priority access to care at military treatment facilities, and does not require the retiree to file claims in most cases. When retirees are given the choice, they overwhelmingly choose Prime over Standard.

I know you all share my conviction that it is deeply unfair that not a single retiree in Puerto Rico can enroll in Prime. My bill, which has been endorsed by many national veterans organizations, would essentially compel the Department of Defense to extend Prime to Puerto Rico if ongoing efforts to convince DoD to change its policy voluntarily do not bear fruit. At my request, Congress included a provision in its major defense bill that requires the Secretary of Defense to submit to Congress within six months a report to examine the feasibility of extending Prime to retirees in Puerto Rico. This is a significant step forward, but much work remains to be done on this front. With the help of organizations like *Somos*, I will continue to press this issue at every opportunity until the goal of equal treatment for Puerto Rican veterans is fully realized.

I want to close by again thanking you, the members of *Somos*. The work you do is noble, just, and good. I hope you enjoy your stay in Puerto Rico and que Dios los bendiga.